

Musicians' strike entering sixth month

A conversation with Detroit Symphony Orchestra violist Jim VanValkenburg

Shannon Jones
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Jim VanValkenburg, assistant principal violist for the Detroit Symphony Orchestra, recently invited this reporter and WSWs arts editor David Walsh into his home to discuss the ongoing strike by DSO musicians.

DSO musicians are now starting the sixth month of a strike that began October 4. The walkout was provoked by management's massive concession demands, including a more than 30 percent pay cut, cuts in health and pension benefits and drastic changes in working conditions.

Last month, Detroit Symphony musicians unanimously rejected a "final offer" presented by DSO management. Following the rejection, management declared negotiations ended and suspended the balance of the 2010-2011 concert season.

In a major concession, last week, the musicians union offered a return to work if the orchestra would agree to submit all outstanding differences to binding arbitration. On March 8, the DSO management announced it had rejected the proposal. Meanwhile, musicians are continuing with their highly successful program of community concerts.

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David Walsh: What's the current situation in the strike?

Jim VanValkenburg: The ball is in the management's court for accepting this binding arbitration proposal. If they don't accept it...then they have willingly and willfully killed the orchestra.

If they do accept it, we will go back to work under terms that are really terrible from our point of view, and I think we will be unique among American orchestras in having some of this League of American Orchestras agenda as part of our contract.

We'd go back to work under terms of their imposed offer, which I believe is proposal B. It is a capitulation on our part. We are saying in the end we care more about the orchestra than you do. They wouldn't mind completely destroying the orchestra and getting rid of all of us. And we don't want that to happen. We know how hard we worked to make it what it is.

There were many times we would have three, four, five rounds of auditions, and I mean 80 people would come in and you wouldn't find anybody, because they were not right. So we would do that four or five times before we found the person we thought we could really get behind. These percussionists [who recently departed the DSO] were fairly recent hires, and they were great; we chose well. It is now going to be very hard to attract that caliber.

This whole service conversion idea is something that has a lot of people upset. It is an optional thing. I guess we get \$7,100 if we go

wherever they want to send us, and that could be to a kid's Bar Mitzvah, we could play at the barbershop. The problem is it is so open-ended, they could send you anywhere for any purpose. I am not sure I trust them to use us well.

This is definitely a power grab on the part of management. They want our executive director, Anne Parsons, to be able to fire one of the musicians. Who is she? What does she know? How can she judge what we do?

The only way a musician can be fired now is by the music director instituting a formal procedure. And that includes peer review by the musicians. They do it for musical reasons. People stop practicing. Sometimes people's skill level goes down through no fault of their own. If they are in a sensitive enough spot, the conductor can initiate the process. And they do. It is important that it not be based on the conductor not liking how you look. That's why there is peer review from the musicians. It used to be if they didn't like the way you looked, you were out.

Who is going to go into this profession if your ability to support your family is based on the whim of a conductor?

When Anne Parsons negotiated the Hollywood Bowl contract—I think it took something like two years to negotiate that deal—she went after the negotiating committee and exacted retribution. So there has to be some sort of language protecting us.

To the extent we give them a victory in this fight, shame on us.

DW: You've taken a really principled stand. If there were to be a capitulation, I can tell you who would be the chief responsible party, the so-called labor movement, the UAW, the AFL-CIO.

JV: I played a string quartet at the UAW headquarters. The theme of the evening was being able to bring unionized activities to other countries, primarily Mexico. I sat a foot from [UAW president] Bob King.... Do you think they became a little too much of the elite with their big salaries?

DW: The UAW owns part of General Motors. They've lost more than 1 million members, and their income hasn't dropped, union officials' salaries haven't dropped.

JV: Their salaries are good.

DW: They do very well for themselves. They don't want that disrupted. We live in a time when the idea of solidarity has been eroded. It has disappeared for union officials.

JV: This management we have are... "thugs" is the word that comes to mind. They have just rammed this through, and it appears they never really wanted a settlement. They made it so unappetizing.

We are being treated with such a lack of respect. I was telling my

wife that I have been doing this a long time. Until this year I felt I was given more respect than I deserve, because people are really kind to musicians who can play well.

They put us on a pedestal that I am not sure we always deserve to be on, but still I have been the recipient of all that and it has been wonderful. And this is sort of a surreal six months where that has been turned on its head and it is a complete lack of that. That's why I think it will be hard to work with people who express that so clearly.

DW: You are being treated no differently than auto workers and public employees. That is the social reality in this country.

JV: I think our management and board saw an orchestra that was truly in financial distress, thanks in large part to themselves. What they didn't count on was that there would be a group of people as strong as us. With the support of a lot of other orchestras we've at least resisted for 22 weeks. We have tried.

You guys alone have seen the broader implications of where this is all coming from. I think the rest of the press has focused on this as a kind of unique situation. It may be for orchestras, but it's not in the bigger picture of things.

Shannon Jones: Tell us a little about your background.

JV: I grew up in Midland, Michigan, and studied viola when I was in 7th grade. I used to drive down and take lessons at the University of Michigan. Then at the end of my 9th grade year, my family moved to Minnesota.

Because of a really lucky break, I kind of got recruited to go to the Interlochen Arts Academy as a boarding school my last two years of high school, and that is where I really caught fire on the viola.

After Interlochen, I applied to the top three music schools, Julliard, Indiana University and Curtis [Institute of Music], and I got into all of them, and I decided to go to Indiana. I helped found a quartet.

I was 20 or 21, and I was assistant professor at IU South Bend. When I went to get my faculty ID, the lady who was doing it didn't believe that I was a faculty member. I had to drag the department chairman in to tell her she could print a faculty ID for me.

We toured a lot in the quartet. We won a few prizes...third prize in Munich. We were the first grand prize winner in the Evian music competition. We won a prize in New York called the East and West Artists concert series, which sponsored our Carnegie Hall debut. Then we became artists-in-residence at Brown University [in Providence, Rhode Island], and I spent six years at Brown with the quartet.

Then, we lost our two violinists. They were a Japanese husband and wife, and she had gotten an amazing job offer in Osaka to teach. They elected to go back to Japan, so the quartet blew up—which was too bad.

I had bought a viola and had \$900-a-month payments; I was in hock up to my eyeballs, so I needed to get a proper job. There were two openings. This was in the summer of 1986. One was for principal in Rochester, New York, and one was for the section in Detroit.

In Rochester, I played one audition; 95 percent of what I played was fine, but then I came to the one excerpt I hadn't quite figured out—Wagner's *Tannhäuser Overture*. It was awful, there wasn't one right note. So I didn't get the job. But a week later, they said they had reconsidered, they would like to offer me the job, but by that time I had a plane ticket to Detroit. I said I will accept it if I don't get the Detroit job. Well, that gave me a little confidence going into the Detroit Symphony audition, so I got the Detroit job. It was fun to call them back and say if you had offered it to me right away, I would have signed it. I have been here ever since.

DW: Do you have any favorites among composers?

JV: Yes, for me the top three would be Bach, Schubert, Mozart. Bach is a strong number one. I just love everything Schubert wrote, and Mozart is amazing.

The viola has such a beautiful mellow sound, theoretically you should be able to do just about anything technically on the viola that you can do on the violin. It is harder on the viola, but it is played the same way. You should be able to do anything on the viola that you can do on the cello. The difference with the cello is that it is almost based on a three-finger system because it is so big. There is a natural advantage on the violin and viola.

SJ: If I can ask, what are your political views?

JV: I have always taken a dim view of this corporate elite. And I don't have a brighter vision now. Philosophically, I have always understood that they have no problem doing this to people. And I have never liked that. Now that they have done it to me, it has just reinforced the things that I believed before.

I tend to vote for the Democrats. I don't remember when the last time I voted for a Republican was. But I understand what you are saying about how poorly the Democratic Party has served the average person. Just today, I saw that Christopher Dodd [former US senator from Connecticut] has accepted a job as the main lobbyist for Hollywood at about a \$1.5 million annual salary. This is the problem, they are all chasing the big bucks. The guy who makes \$1.5 million a year or more is going to be thinking about himself, not the average guy.

The money is so big. It has got to change you. People have tried to portray [DSO music director] Leonard Slatkin's silence as principled. But if I were being paid \$65,000 a week, I would keep my mouth shut too. That is what he has been getting for not conducting.

The whole financial services industry has just got out of control. What do they produce? What do they give us except public debt? We've made the debt public and privatized the profit. It is just extraordinary that they were allowed to get away with that. They are still up to the same old tricks. We get fleeced.

I love how after the Iraq and Afghanistan wars and all this deficit spending, suddenly the deficit is the priority. Where did that come from? When did that happen? They didn't care about the deficit when they were running it up. And what did we get for all that? Nothing but pain.

I would love to see it happen, a reordering of things.



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